

SERMON: Wisdom and Understanding

TEXT: I Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14 Ephesians 5:15-20

Many of us grew up hearing the classic story of Aladdin's Lamp. And our children and grandchildren have enjoyed it, too, thanks to Disney's 1992 version, titled simply, Aladdin. In this animated motion picture, Robin Williams is the comedic genius voice of the genie in the bottle. When Aladdin rubs the tarnished lamp, the genie appears and of course grants him three wishes, but he also has a few provisos: The genie can't kill anyone; he can't make anyone fall in love; he can't bring people back from the dead; and "ixnay" on wishing for more wishes. Other than that, the sky's the limit in terms of what Aladdin can wish for.

Because of this wonderful story, we have all at one time or another dreamed of finding a genie in a bottle who would grant us three wishes. As children we probably wished for the latest toys, a new bicycle, or a trip to Disneyland. And as we grow older, we don't quit wishing, but our wishes perhaps become a little more sophisticated. Most of us use the first wish to ask for a great sum of money – a million dollars or the Powerball jackpot. The second wish is probably is more thoughtful and generous – something that would improve the world, like peace on earth or no more sickness. And with the third wish we get greedy again, as we try – despite the rules – to find a clever way to get more wishes.

If you know your Bible well, you know that King Solomon got a similar offer from God. As we heard from the book of First Kings, the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, “Ask what I should give you.” That was the offer – only one wish (if you will), but with no conditions, no limitations, no provisos, no ixnay. Just, “ask what I should give you.”

As he considered this offer, Solomon remembered the “great and steadfast love” God had shown to his father David. Solomon further realized – or at least verbalized – his own inadequacy in the face of the enormous task he’d been given as the new king over Israel. “And now, O Lord, my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David, although I am only a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.”

Informed by these thoughts, Solomon made his request: “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”

When I first read this, it stopped me in my tracks. To think that God left himself wide open for Solomon to ask anything in the world, and then to think that Solomon asked for WISDOM AND UNDERSTANDING above anything else in the world – it's almost unbelievable to me. It is no surprise that God was pleased with such an unselfish request.

God said to him, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I now do according to your word. Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you." And then God gave him a little bonus: "I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you."

It really makes you think about our silly, little wishes, doesn't it? And it makes me wonder, how would our wishes be different if we knew it wasn't just a game of make-believe? In real-life, when we're asking for gifts from God, what do we ask for?

Of course, as adults we understand that there is a difference between prayers and wishes, and our prayers are rarely silly (aside from the occasional prayer to find a parking space!). We ask for health and healing for ourselves and others, we ask for safety and protection, we ask for help with relationships and finances and other difficult life situations.

It is notable and admirable that Solomon asked for “an understanding mind.” He didn’t ask for others to understand him; he didn’t simply ask that the Israelites follow his leadership. Solomon knew that good leadership would depend on his understanding of his people. We might conclude then, that understanding is the essence of wisdom.

In fact, if we look at other translations of the Bible, we can see it even more clearly. In the New American Bible, Solomon asks for an “understanding heart” as opposed to an understanding mind. The New Jerusalem Bible simply changes the word order, where Solomon asks for “a heart to understand.” I think the Revised English Bible expresses it best as Solomon requests “a heart with the skill to listen.” Taking all these together, we can define true wisdom as having a mind and heart with the skill to listen and understand.

St. Francis of Assisi made a similar request of God in his well-known prayer:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred let me sow love,  
Where there is injury let me sow pardon,  
Where there is doubt, faith,  
Where there is despair, hope,  
Where there is darkness, light,  
And where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Divine Master,  
Grant that I may not seek so much to be consoled as to console,  
To be understood as to understand,  
To be loved as to love.*

*For it is in giving that we receive,  
It is in forgiving that we are forgiven,  
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

In our book study beginning this week on *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*, we are seeking understanding. It is my prayer that we will listen to our neighbors, people of color, to understand better their lives and their struggles. It is my prayer that we will also come to understand ourselves better; that we will learn how to be allies to those who don't look like us; and that – with humility and wisdom – we will repent of our complicity in a racist society.

Not only was Solomon asking to understand those whom he ruled, he was also asking to understand the difference between good and evil. Too bad, though, that he didn't ask for the strength and courage to *do* good rather than evil.

You see, Solomon didn't live up to his original intentions. Nothing about his actions indicated an "understanding, listening heart." Rather, he oppressed his people and was wise only in the shrewd and crafty sense of the word. He apparently got caught up in God's promise of lifelong riches and honor and missed that last part where God said, "If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life."

Despite the fact that Solomon failed to make good use of the gift that God gave him, WISDOM AND UNDERSTANDING are still virtues for which we can strive. When Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, he said, "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.... Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Here is yet another important part of WISDOM AND UNDERSTANDING: understanding the will of the Lord. There's no question in my mind that the will of

the Lord includes that we understand one another and not just that we can distinguish between good and evil, but that we DO good rather than evil. But just as understanding one another requires a “heart with the skill to listen” so understanding God requires listening.

In our prayers, how often do we stop listing our wishes and simply listen for the still, small voice of God? How often do we say to God, as God said to Solomon, “Ask what I should give you”? What if we were the genie in the bottle offering God three wishes? Could you grant whatever God asked from you?

WISDOM is about UNDERSTANDING: Understanding one another, understanding God, understanding *and choosing* good over evil. But it takes more than a genie in a bottle to accomplish them. It takes intention and prayer, it takes the commitment of our minds and our hearts, it takes a selfless and loving spirit – day in and day out – all for the glory of God!

AMEN.